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22 April 1966

“DEAR SENATOR:”

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USAWC RESEARCH ELEMENT
(Essay)

"Dear Senator:"

by

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Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania
22 April 1966

SUMMARY

This essay emphasizes the role played by the Congress in providing for the manpower needs of the Army. It discusses the pressures acting on the individual Congressman and the impact made on him by letters of inquiry and complaint from soldiers and their families. A typical case is cited and examined, and used as a basis for recommendations for possible improvement in the Army's responsiveness to Congressional inquiries.

It is proposed that three approaches can be taken. First, an increase in Army staffs to handle the increasing volume of Congressional correspondence is considered and, for the most part, rejected. Second, improvements in quality of personnel management attitudes, techniques and practices are proposed as reasonably fruitful to reduce the basic causes of complaints. Third, it is proposed that legislation be enacted and implementing regulations designed to preclude false or improper complaints being made.

In short, the essay is a plea for improvements in personnel management practices, with particular emphasis on optimum attention to responsive, honest, and prompt replies to Congressional inquiries in order that the Army's needs for manpower not be unfavorably and unnecessarily prejudiced.

"DEAR SENATOR:"

American history reflects a basic mistrust of military strength in times of peace and an insistence at all times on civilian supervision of the utilization of every man furnished to the military by a begrudging nation. The watchdogs of military manpower usage continue to be the members of the House of Representatives and the Senate from whose districts the manpower must be drawn. Most of these lawmakers have had personal experience with the military, most often during the chaos of war. Each has formed an emotional response to all things military--some favorable, but most with a predominately hazy recollection of confusion, interminable waiting, and performance of tasks which they felt were either unrelated, unnecessary or for which they were not trained or suited. As a result, when issues arise concerning the military needs for more men, each issue is examined from a highly critical and suspicious viewpoint. During the years of the representative's service, he continues to have contact with men in uniform through the letters he receives from them and their families. The basic feelings he has toward the military are either reinforced or modified depending upon the nature of these letters and the response he obtains from the Army to his questions concerning them. His conditioned feelings will certainly affect his attitude and voting record on questions concerning military manpower requests. For this reason it is essential that the Army recognize the importance of each query received and provide to the representative answers which are truly responsive to the questions asked.

Before going further, let me insert a personal opinion formed through a year of daily contact with Congressional office staffs. It is commonly believed that members of Congress ask for many favors and expect the military services to deviate from established policy upon request in order to enhance the representative's political aims. Nothing could be further from the truth. It is true that on occasion such a request will be made, but the occasions are extremely rare and generally based on unusual circumstances over which the representative has no control. It is equally true that the military accedes to such requests for favoritism in very few cases, and again only when the circumstances warrant special treatment. The matters which I propose to discuss are not these, but the normal flow of Congressional correspondence concerning personnel matters of the military and affecting individuals who have genuine, imagined, or falsified complaints or inquiries. The volume of such correspondence in the Army alone reaches nearly 800 cases each week!

To set the stage, let us look at a fictionalized series of letters representative of a "typical" case among 40,000. It is upon cases such as this that the members of Congress base their judgment of the way the Army treats their constituents.

Dear Senator:

I hesitate to turn to you for help for I know how very busy you are in trying to run our huge government. However, I have tried in every way I know to solve a problem very important to me and have been given the brush-off from everyone. I know of no one else who might be able to help. Although my problem may seem small to you, it is the biggest thing in my life.

I will try to be brief. My son is 19. He could not afford to go to college and the draft board would not defer him to help me here on the farm. I got along pretty well until I fell and hurt my back and can't do the heavy work anymore. I need my son home to get the crops in and he has only four months left to serve. His commanding officer told him to apply for hardship discharge and it was refused, but nobody told me why. He had wanted to put in for an early out, but his First Sergeant said he couldn't qualify. Now it is almost time to harvest, my son is in the Army and if I don't get him home I will lose this farm and all I've worked for all my life.

Please help me. Thank God for men like you!

Sincerely,

John Doe

P.S. I voted for you in the last election.

Dear Mr. Doe:

I have referred your letter to the Department of the Army who has assured me that your case will receive prompt attention. I am aware of your plight and will do all I can to help. I will let you know the results as soon as possible for I know that time is critical at this point.

Sincerely,

Senator J. D. Zilch

Chief of Legislative Liaison
Office of the Secretary of the Army

Dear Sir:

Please investigate the complaint referred to me and furnish me with a basis for reply as soon as possible. I am most anxious to help. It does seem that the man is asking very little and has a great deal at stake.

Sincerely,

Senator J. D. Zilch

Commanding General Fort Swampy
CONGRESSIONAL INQUIRY

Dear General Jones:

Please note enclosed letter of inquiry from Senator Zilch concerning Private S. M. Doe, US 12 345 678, a member of your command who has apparently been denied a hardship discharge.

Since time appears to be of the essence, please reply direct to Senator Zilch, furnishing this office with a copy of your reply.
Suspense: 5 working days.

Sincerely,
James T. Whosis
Major Inf
Congressional Inquiries Branch

Dear Senator Zilch:

Your inquiry concerning Private S. M. Doe, US 12 345 678, a member of my command has been received and appropriate investigation of his complaint completed.

I regret to inform you that circumstances surrounding Private Doe's request for hardship discharge do not meet current criteria and his request was necessarily denied.

If I may be of further assistance please do not hesitate to call on me.

Sincerely,
J. J. Jones
Major General
Commanding

This exchange of letters, all of which are purely fictitious as to names and places, is typical of a large number of Congressional inquiries and responses taking place today. Let us now consider the probable results in the Senator's office..

Administrative Assistant: "What the **** does D/A mean by 'it doesn't meet the criteria'."

Action officer: "I don't know either. It is the usual junk we get back from them. I wish they would give us the whole story so we can really help our constituents. The boss isn't going to like this one!"

Administrative Assistant: "Well, I'll give it to the Senator and see if he wants us to go back to L&L with it or just try to dream something up. By the way, isn't he due to go to the hearings on the Reserve Call-up at three o'clock?"

Senator, after reading the reply: "That is just what I expected. The Army can just go begging for more men if that is the way they are going to treat my people

and give me the run around to boot. Send it back,
..... no, on second thought, I'll take it along to
the meeting with me!"

One needs little imagination to predict the amount of cooperation the Army will receive from this particular Senator in committee hearings on the need for additional manpower. Multiply this letter by the 800 which the Secretary of the Army's office of Legislative Liaison receives each week from all of the Senators and Congressmen in office, and you can begin to gain a "feel" for the impact that complaint letters have on Congressional opinions about Army manpower management. This impact is not all bad. Some of it is exceptionally good, but unfortunately all too much of it falls in the type fictionalized above.

First of all, just how does the system for handling Congressional inquiries work? Initially, the Secretary of the Army maintains an office to handle Congressional matters (as do the Navy and Air Force Secretaries). The office is an integral part of the Secretary's personal office simply because of its importance to the Army and its proper role in responding to Congressional interest. Part of the office is devoted to the role the Army plays in coordinating necessary legislation. Another part deals with matters such as base closures, medical problems, and a host of things that involve people, but as groups, not individuals. Another part deals with the Army staff in connection with such activities as Army presentations before Congressional hearings, etc. All of these offices are important. All play key roles. The one that has the most frequent contact, based

on sheer volume, and perhaps the most intensive continuous relationship with the Congress as a whole, is the part that deals with personnel matters as they affect individuals. The impact is usually intensified by the emotional level that is often generated as an exchange of letters or telephone calls develops.

Since the Secretary has a central office for handling Congressional inquiries and because he wishes to ensure uniformity of policy application and exercise his right to adjust or revise policy, the Secretary encourages the Congress to deal with his office rather than with the individual commanders. Procedures have been built up through the years which permit the administrative staffs in both the Secretary's office and the many Congressional offices to carry the daily load. Many of the Congressional staffs have been "in the business" for ten or twenty years and know as much about Army personnel policies and procedures as do the Army experts. In short, they can't be fooled and can't be given short shrift. To assist them and permit them to make factual replies to simple inquiries they are regularly provided "fact sheets" on such matters as the proper methods for applying for transfer, securing a hardship discharge, travel pay, and many other actions which are clearly a matter of regulation. The staffs of the more experienced members of Congress can, and do, reply to many inquiries of the "how do I?" variety without referring the letters to the Army. In addition, they usually tell the soldier or his family to contact the appropriate officer at the soldier's station and assure him that officer can and will help.

Given all this, it would seem that there really is no basis or cause for faulty responses to Congressional inquiries. Unfortunately, the volume of inquiries has become so great that neither the Congressional offices nor the Secretary can handle all the cases themselves. In ninety per cent of the cases received it is necessary for the Secretary to secure additional information from the soldier's commander or higher headquarters, or both. Insofar as possible this is done. The information is obtained and is evaluated for appropriateness, completeness, and responsiveness to the desire of the member of the Congress. A reply is then prepared for the use of the member--he normally sends a copy to the complainant along with a note of his own. Thus, the letter must be so phrased that it is fully understandable to the soldier and his family and properly respectful and formal for the member. This is frequently a most difficult task, requiring the utmost in tact, judgment in knowing what to include and what to omit, and to so phrase the response that the dignity of all parties involved are respected. When an error is discovered on the Army's part, it is openly acknowledged and a statement of the corrective action taken is included. In cases of extreme sensitivity, personal contact is made between an Army representative and the member of Congress in order to avoid embarrassment of any party to the problem.

The unfortunate fact is that the Secretary simply cannot give this type of careful treatment to all inquiries received. As a result, the inquiries are screened and the probable "touchy" ones are retained for Secretarial treatment. The remainder are sent out to

the appropriate commanders for either a reply direct to the member of Congress or for information upon which the Secretary may make a reply. In either case, work is generated at every echelon. Almost every command has, within the appropriate Army Regulation, a set procedure and strict controls for the handling of Congressional correspondence. Certain commanders know that the very nature of their mission will generate many inquiries. A basic training center, for example, generates inquiries in far greater proportion to strength than an active unit. Units located in areas to which dependents may not travel will have many more problems than units more fortunately located. Volume creates problems of its own, not the least of which is frustration at the number of inquiries which are nonsensical in content, vindictive or malicious in intent, false in factual matters, twisted out of context, submitted without any effort having been made to let the Army correct the situation, or submitted by friends or family of the soldier based on misinformation from the soldier. It is all too easy to become impatient with such cases.

This is where the problem sets in. Let us now go back to our fictional series of letters and examine the actions taken by General Jones. His inquiry appeared to be routine and L&L sent it for direct reply. The General most likely saw the incoming letter himself--he wouldn't want to be caught unprepared in the event of a telephone call about the matter. He directs immediate investigation of the case and a reply prepared for his signature. His staff then began their research. Let us assume the following facts (again, not real in this

case but representative of perhaps 300 reviewed by the writer):

1. The soldier is in the command. (This may sound irrelevant, but many cases are on file where the family didn't even know the whereabouts of their particular soldier.)

2. The soldier did apply for a hardship discharge. The application was properly processed in accordance with regulations.

3. The soldier inquired of his first sergeant about an early release, but was told that he was not eligible.

4. The request was denied by the assigned board of officers after it was determined that the father owned a large farm employing several field hands, labor was difficult to obtain but could be found at relatively high prices, and that the father's back injury had not materially changed the work that he performed himself. The local draft board had been contacted and that office had re-examined the case and concluded that if the soldier were being considered for selection now he would be selected for induction, but that a deferment until after the crop was harvested would likely be approved. The staff properly concluded that the request did not meet the criteria established for a hardship discharge. No additional inquiry was required. The reply was prepared and the General felt safe in staking his reputation on signing it.

Now let us go back to the Senator's office. The Senator has had time to think about the case and directs his assistant to go back to L&L to find out just why the discharge didn't meet the criteria. The administrative assistant telephones the L&L action officer and asks

for further details. The L&L action officer telephones the Congressional Liaison officer in General Jones' office and is given the facts as obtained in the investigation. Having had considerable experience with Senator Zilch and his consistent support of the farm program and his knowledge of farm labor problems, the action officer asks about the possibility of an early release. It is then learned that the soldier is eligible for early release and can be separated in time to assist with the crop harvest. It is agreed that the soldier should be called in, advised of the proper procedures to submit such an application, and L&L be advised by telephone of the results. In due course, a status report is received that the application was submitted by the soldier but had to be returned to him for retyping and to obtain additional sworn statements as to conditions at home. Finally, two days before harvest was to begin, the separation was approved and L&L was assured that he would be separated in ten days, the time required for physical examination and other separation processing. The soldier was discharged two weeks after harvest began. The Senator was informed by telephone. He was not pleased! He could see no reason why this option was not considered at the time of the review of his hardship discharge case and if the soldier had legitimate reasons for early release why the staff could not have handled the paperwork and have used the material collected by the family for the hardship application. He summed up his feelings with the comment:

This is another example of Army red-tape and treating impressionable young men and their families in a

high-handed manner with no compassion or imaginative effort to help. The time we all spent on this simple matter wasted more manpower than the Army would have lost if it had never inducted the man in the first place! You may be sure that I will continue to look at your requests for more people with a mighty cold eye.

Was the Senator justified in this case? Certainly! Could it have been prevented? Yes! Let's look at the type of letter which the Senator should have received:

Dear Senator Zilch:

Your inquiry concerning Private S. M. Doe, US 12 345 678 has been investigated. I regret to inform you that his application for hardship discharge was denied after it was determined that conditions on the family farm did not constitute a hardship on him or his family which would be materially removed by his separation from the service. An agency not under the jurisdiction of the Army was consulted in arriving at this conclusion.

I am pleased to inform you, however, that during the course of the investigation it was determined that Private Doe is eligible for release under the program designed to assist young men and their families in farm communities where farm labor is scarce and when the financial welfare of the farm would be jeopardized without the soldier's presence and when he can assist by release not more than ninety days early. He is being processed for such early release and should be home in time to help with the harvest. The First Sergeant with whom the young man spoke did not understand the inquiry at the time but has been fully briefed in the event that such a request comes to his attention again.

Your interest in this soldier is appreciated and I am happy that our investigation resulted in an equitable solution for all concerned.

Sincerely,
J. J. Jones
Major General
Commanding

What constituted the difference? Imagination and sincere compassion. Was it necessary to ignore or bend regulations or policies? No! Did the Senator have more respect for General Jones, his command, and the

Army as a result of reasonable and helpful personnel processing? Most certainly!

Now let us multiply this case by thousands per year, affecting nearly every Senator, every Congressman, their staffs, and the professional staffs of the all-important Armed Services and Appropriations Committees of the two legislative branches. Every single case reflects upon the Army's ability to do its job. The Army continues to be given additional missions, its daily tasks grow more complex and man-hour demanding, its rotational base more consumptive, and its training requirements more intensive. Manpower quality and quantity are both of utmost importance. Despite cartoonist's efforts to degrade the quality of our elected representatives, close association will prove to the most prejudiced observer that these men are sincerely dedicated to their awesome responsibilities. They have full awareness of their responsibility to represent their constituencies and to do so in the best interests of the United States as a whole. These two facets of their duty often conflict and it taxes their tact, patience, and courage to satisfy one requirement at the risk of denying satisfaction to the other.

A typical representative has become convinced of the necessity for the nation to establish and maintain balanced military forces capable of preserving the security of the United States and furthering its other national aspirations. He has certain doubts as to how this is to be best accomplished, but in general he accepts those strengths and organizations which the military establishment recommends and

which the Armed Services Committee approves and the Appropriations Committees pay for. From a constituent point of view, however, his supporters (and detractors) do not have the benefit of being in the national capital and having the flood of information provided which he has. It is up to him to convince his constituency that what the national government is asking of them is right and proper and that they must support it. He, in effect, asks their support in this case of the necessity to draft their sons away from home, family, livelihood, and personal freedom in our cherished pursuit of happiness. These things our representative is prepared to do.....just so long as he is satisfied that every man or boy that is taken by the military service is fairly treated, utilized for the purpose for which he was drafted, and is released in accordance with laws in effect at the time.

These comments as to a representative's views obviously apply equally well to those young men who respond to the enticements of the several military recruiting agencies, but with even greater emphasis on the necessity for the military to comply to the letter of any enlistment option offered or promised.

If it could be assumed that all personnel management in the Army were perfect and that no personnel inequities occurred and that all soldiers were true, honest, and completed their service without blemish, there would be no inquiries or complaints sent to the representatives. This is not and never will be the case. Our society of soldiers will have a cross section of personalities similar to the

society from which they came. Some will cheat, lie, steal, murder, rape, run away, mutiny, defect, beat their wives and children, become ill or diseased, get injured, die, or be killed. Every such incident involves not only the soldier, but all of the people the incident involved. From Congressional standpoints, it also affects everyone that knows or is associated with all those people involved. They will tell their neighbors who will tell theirs and eventually "they" are the representative's constituency. The representative thus becomes personally involved in an individual soldier's problem. The soldier may be anywhere in the world, he may be either innocent or guilty, and his complaint may or may not have merit. In any event, the Congressman needs help. He deserves it and it is a clear responsibility of the Army to give it to him.

There are many factors which influence the Army's ability to render the best possible support to the Congress in this particular personnel management problem. Many of them, such as pay, housing, educational benefits, and the like, are beyond the scope of this paper. Within the personnel management sphere and the procedures for handling of Congressional inquiries, however, there are certain steps which the Army can institute, some of which they can change, and some which can be improved or emphasized.

As indicated earlier, much of the problem stems from sheer volume which forces an increasing formation of impersonal attitudes on the part of the people doing the work. Three solutions would appear immediately apparent: increase the work force, improve

managerial efficiency, or reduce the volume.

The size of the work force engaged in handling Congressional inquiries is almost impossible to determine for so much of the input data is developed and investigation is conducted by persons having other duties as primary functions. The force in the Secretary of the Army's office could be augmented and probably should be. This will never be a permanent solution to the problem, though, for we would be guilty of treating symptoms instead of the disease.

Even with the largest staff at the Washington level, and even comparable large staffs at the major command levels, work quality will never be better than the quality of the information which is provided. For that matter, poor quality of personnel management work is frequently the cause of the complaint in the first place. It is suggested that a good place to start making improvements is at the lowest level of personnel management. The individual soldier, whether draftee or old-timer is a victim of the personnel management system. It is normal that he should be; he would be in any large organization. He does, however, have the right to expect prompt and accurate responses to his questions, proper evaluation of his needs and eligibility for help, and assistance in complying with the myriad of intricate regulations which our complex system imposes on the individual soldier. Where does the soldier go for help? He is sent from his unit to the central personnel office. This too is in keeping with accepted management practice of consolidating expertise and routinizing office procedures. Here, though, is where the similarity often stops. In

business, this central personnel office is staffed with experts. In the Army, it is staffed with clerks at the data-posting level, who have little expertise. A Private First Class or Specialist Four with about 18 months to two years service is expected to be able to unravel detailed and often conflicting regulations. He has superiors to whom he may turn, but here too, there is a problem. The number of officers in the Army is in fixed proportion to the number of soldiers. Warrant officers who can become true experts in such fields as personnel administration are counted as officers. We can no longer, it has been determined, afford the number of warrant officers it takes to properly supervise our lower levels of personnel management (because they are needed in other specialized fields which are considered more critical). We use Lieutenants instead who are bright and willing, but not particularly able during their short tenure to become expert in their job. As a result. . .in my obviously oversimplified and perhaps unfair description. . .our soldier gets the best advice that a Pfc can give as monitored by a green Lieutenant. All is well in most of the cases, but it is the cases where it isn't that cause the trouble. For a simple example; a man enlists to be an Army cook. He is so trained and upon completion is reported for assignment to Department of Army. Orders duly are published assigning him to Europe for duty as an artilleryman. The soldier is baffled. He goes to his Pfc contact and protests. The Pfc asks the Lieutenant, who probably can only say, "Don't ask me, that is what D/A said, so I guess that is what he is supposed to do."

Our soldier can do two things: he can go to the Inspector General who can unravel the problem very quickly, or he can contact his Congressman. Unfortunately, he has little trust in the IG, so his Congressman gets an inquiry. Upon checking, the cause of the problem is very simple. When posting the available trainee graduate qualification, a simple digit was transposed on machine records tape: a cook became an artilleryman because someone typed 141 instead of 941.

This type of problem is receiving the utmost of careful study by the Adjutant General and new complex data processing systems have been acquired to help eliminate errors. There are still many valid reasons why the system will continue to improve only slowly. It is discussed here only to emphasize that quality improvement in management practices is not the whole solution.

The third solution is to reduce the number of complaints or inquiries. Here is a most delicate choice. The right of every citizen, in or out of uniform, to correspond with his elected representative is basic to our democratic form of government. There must never be an infringement upon this right, real or even imagined. Nothing incites a member of Congress to wrath more explosively than an indication or accusation that a soldier was mistreated because he contacted or threatened to contact his representative. This is precisely the way it must be in our society.

On the other hand, many a Congressman has been personally embarrassed because a soldier or his family failed to present a true picture

or did not first avail himself of his other avenues of assistance. The Army at all levels is actively engaged in trying to find methods by which the volume of inquiries can be reduced without infringing in any manner with the constituent-representative relationship. What specific measures are being tested or explored the writer does not know, nor should they be discussed in a paper such as this until they are reasonably firm. However, the writer does have some ideas in this area which might be explored.

It should be acceptable to members of the Congress and to the judicial branch to make it a punishable offense for a soldier to provide false information to his representative. Admittedly, there are both problems and loopholes in such an approach. To prove falsity would often be difficult. The soldier could circumvent the law by having a third party, such as his wife or mother, write the letter. Or the soldier could present facts in such a distorted way or out of context that the truth could appear as damaging as a falsity. Even accepting these drawbacks, however, it is believed that such a law would have a directly healthful impact on the problem. It would deter most of the fraudulent claims (for which there are no statistics, but the writer would guess that about three in each hundred falls in this category). It would cause many potential complainants to re-examine their position and perhaps try once more to be sure of their information and by so doing either understand the reason for the problem or get a solution. I would suspect that this would reduce the total by nearly a quarter if the Adjutant General continues to improve

the quality of the management people to whom the soldier would turn for data.

Another proposal, fraught with dangers, would be to require the soldier to include in his letter a statement of the steps he has taken to obtain help from within the Army. This would not only require the letter to be factual, but would cause the soldier to actually take the steps he should take. In most cases he would get the help he needs (again assuming improved management people and their having more time through reduced volume). Once a matter of routine, this provision could save nearly half the letters of complaint. The danger lies in the interpretation which would most likely be placed on the requirement by the soldier and his immediate superiors to the effect that this was a means of stopping or forcibly dissuading the soldier from his right to contact his representative. To be effective, such a requirement would have to be carefully prescribed, implemented only after a skillful educational campaign, and enforced with complete and impartial sincerity on the part of every commander from squad leader on up.

Finally, there needs to be a renewed emphasis throughout the Army of the current maxim of "putting the personal into personnel." This thought needs to be extended into every Army activity that touches upon the utilization of personnel, as well as on its management. For example, when it is decided that the force structure will be improved by the deletion of one Signal Battalion and the activation of an Ordnance Battalion, the planners should habitually think of the personnel impact and the time required to restore balance in the grade

and military specialty quotas. The guidon can change in a five minute ceremony, but a soldier feeding his family on proficiency pay as a skilled electronic repairman can't regain proficiency qualification as an ordnance specialist in that time. Restrictions on surplus specialties, permanent moves within a fiscal year, and a host of other prohibitions may preclude the soldier from reestablishing himself for many months and through no fault of his own. This is the type of complaint that a Congressman finds most compelling and one which is almost impossible to explain by any series of rational statements. Better integration of operational and personnel planning is required. A similar problem arises through the myriad of specialties in which today's soldiers are trained. Some courses take many months to complete. Too often, by the time the soldier receives his diploma he finds that he is unassignable because there are no vacancies for him. Investigation will show all kinds of perfectly logical reasons why he is surplus to current needs, but there is no equally plausible explanation for why his situation could not have been avoided. Obviously, all such cases can never be precluded. Since this is true, there must be built into our management system sufficient flexibility to ensure that the individual soldier is not made the victim of "the system." Broader specialty designations, more TOE or TD positions with "MOS immaterial" designations, or more latitude in grade specifications are possible sources of flexibility which could be examined for feasibility.

In short, it is my contention that Congressional interest in Army

personnel problems are proper, and the Army must respond to inquiries rapidly and with a sincere desire to be helpful. In order to accomplish this task, means must be found to reduce the volume of complaints and inquiries through new legislation; improved personnel management practices; more highly qualified management personnel; and an extension of personnel implications to all Army activities. Given the continuing increased demands upon the Army and its corresponding demands for manpower upon the Congress, it is essential that every reasonable means for becoming more responsive to the individual soldier's needs, and hence to those of his representative, must be imaginatively sought and energetically pursued.

Wallace K. Wittwer
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Lt Col, MPC